Public narratives under intensified market conditions: Chile as a critical case

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This paper aims to extend existing theorisations around the notion of public narratives by analysing their regulatory effects under intensified market conditions. My analysis suggests that public narratives constitute a liminal space, one that it is not exclusively real or imaginary, factual or normative, but that simultaneously affects and is affected by vernacular practices and wider discursive structures. However, this paper argues, under extreme conditions, these public narratives become a rigidifying space with homogenising/normalising effects. To do this I look at a set of 'obligatory scenes' captured in tales of success and struggle of teachers, parents and students in popular newspapers and fringe media in Chile. These accounts share a common ground: national assessment as a framework of intelligibility for the practices of parents, teachers and students. The central claim of this paper is that under intensified market conditions the scenes captured in these publicly available stories become 'obligatory' storylines, and their protagonists idealised policy subjects.

Keywords: market; education policy; Chile; public narrative; intensification; neoliberalism

Introduction

The neo-liberal narrative suggests that self-interested behaviour is the precondition of collective benefit, and so social order should be based in the creation of the possibilities for self-interested competition in the free market. In line with this thinking, education systems around the world have incorporated market structures in different forms with the stated intention of increasing efficiency and equity via competition and choice, using performance metrics as the criteria for the allocation of resources and opportunities and as market information for choosers.

Despite decades of debate, this continues to be a field of contestation. Smith (1995) had already warned us more than 20 years ago of the 'unintended consequences' of using performance data for the management of public sector institutions. A more recent report from the British Academy Measuring Success, League tables in the public sector (Foley & Goldstein, 2012, p. 8) also highlights the dangers of these practices now widely common across different sectors ranging from education to crime and policing. Within the field of education, scholars around the world have repeatedly denounced how performance management works to reinforce existing structural inequalities (Apple, 2006; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Lissovoy &

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McLaren, 2003). These effects have been discussed in relation to teachers (Ball, 2003; Whitty, 1997), students (Kenway & Bullen, 2001), school leadership (Grace, 1997), and organisational practices (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Hunter, 1996). Hall et al. (2004) nicely summarise these effects saying that 'assessment, narrowed to testing, defines the school day, the curriculum, the teacher's responsibilities, the pupil's worth, the ideal parent and what counts as ability' (p. 801). Taken together, these studies examine how schools (and teachers and students within them) are affected and re-articulated by market-informed policies, but the publicly available stories of success and struggle in relation to these market technologies remain virtually unexplored. The focus of existing research has been primarily on observable social behaviour of individuals affected by these social structures rather than the broader publicly available narrative constructions around market processes that contextualise processes of identity formation.

In this paper I want to bridge that gap by exploring the role of public narratives around education in the context of a hyper-marketised environment: Chile. This paper aims to extend existing theorisations around the notion of public narratives by analysing their regulatory effects under intensified market conditions. My analysis suggests that public narratives constitute a liminal space, one that it is not exclusively real or imaginary, factual or normative, but that simultaneously affects and is affected by vernacular practices and wider discursive structures. However, this paper also argues that under extreme conditions these public narratives become a rigidifying space with homogenising/normalising effects.

To do this I look at a set of 'obligatory scenes' captured in tales of success and struggle of teachers, parents and students in popular newspapers and fringe media in Chile. These accounts share a common ground: the national assessment as a framework of intelligibility for the 'signifying practices' (Butler, 1997, p. 85) of the school, characterised by the omnipresence of standardised data on pupils' performance in national curriculum tests. The central claim of this paper is that under intensified market conditions the scenes captured in these publicly available stories become 'obligatory' storylines, and their protagonists idealised policy subjects (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). These idealised policy subjects produced by the accelerated flow of school metrics feed into wider meritocratic 'master narratives' which regard the subject as a rational chooser responsible for their self-defined desires and values, and hence responsible for their position within society. So, in Althusser's (1972) terms, these depictions become interpellative; they constitute a demand to acquit oneself against de-classed and geographically unrestrained accounts of 'success'. While this paper is focused on the implications of these ubiquitous public narratives, this is not to deny the existence of alternate narratives. Grassroots movements like Alto al SIMCE[1] (Stop SIMCE) and other pockets of resistance evidence a growing awareness of how this huge machinery is reproducing existing inequalities, with some impressive achievements like the sanction of a new national assessment plan by the Consejo Nacional de Educación, which reduces the amount of SIMCE tests by half over the 2016-2020 period.[2]

In the next section I discuss the main theoretical underpinnings of this paper, with a focus on Margaret Somers' conceptualisation of narrativity. The succeeding section provides a brief outline of the main features of the educational system in Chile, as a case in point of market intensification. After an outline of the methodology, the third section focuses on a set of 'obligatory' scenes in mainstream and fringe media. In the final section I discuss the significance of narrativity to understanding political change, with attention to the negotiation of identity under intensified market conditions.

Theoretical tools: narrative networks and idealised subjects

In order to understand the specificities of public narratives in the context of market intensification this paper employs some tools from cultural sociology and geography. As noted already, I draw upon Margaret Somers' conceptualisations of narrativity and Hall et al.'s (2004) notion of idealised neoliberal subjects.

Somers (1994) argues that the core feature of narrative is that –

> … it renders understanding only by connecting (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or a social network of relationships (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices. (p. 616)

This suggests the need to focus on how individual and collective stories are connected together, and the complexity of these multiple connections. In particular, this perspective emphasises the prominence of existing narratives and the consequent need for people to locate themselves and/or be located within a repertoire of emplotted stories. This means that we can only make sense of our present or past circumstances by attempting to assemble or integrate them into one or more existing narratives (p. 614). The corollary of this is an ontological assumption:

> that people are guided to act by the structural and cultural relationships in which they are embedded and by the stories through which they constitute their identities - and less because of the interests we impute to them. (p. 624)

Public narratives, Somers argues, are those narratives 'attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions, however local or grand, micro or macro-stories' (p. 619). This notion has a strong correspondence with Taylor's (2004) account of social imaginaries, which he describes as 'a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other' (p. 24). In fact, Taylor reminds us that social imaginaries are both factual and normative. This means that, whilst they incorporate a sense of how things usually go, this 'is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice' (p. 24). Indeed, this (tacitly) normative aspect of narratives is of great importance for the argument put forward in this paper, which suggests that these public stories are not merely descriptive accounts but their reach extends beyond their specific informative purposes, perhaps even beyond conscious registers.[3] Indeed, Taylor suggests that the social imaginary is 'carried in images, stories and legends' (p. 23). Based on Taylor's conceptualizations, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) use the notion of social imaginary to suggest that 'policies are not only located within discourses, but also in imaginaries that shape thinking about how things might be 'otherwise'—different from the way they are now. It is in this way that policies direct or steer practice towards a particular normative state of affairs' (p. 8, my emphasis).

The second notion I employ in this paper relates to the emergence of idealised policy subjects (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012) as a by-product of the process of market intensification. That is, idealised understandings about parents, teachers and students, and the ways these notions are infused with particular assumptions about rationality, and individualised forms of advantage seeking. Paraphrasing Butler (1990), it could be said that these idealised policy subjects result from the accelerated circulation of performance-driven acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that

congeal over time to produce the appearance of naturalistic necessity. In order to provide some context to the public narratives under analysis, in what follows I provide an outline of what, in my view, constitutes the backbone of the market education policy in Chile.

Background: key policy formations in Chile[4]

Influenced very directly by Friedman's belief in the benefits of the regulation of education through market principles, the military government under the advice of the Chicago Boys, implemented the first educational system in the world to adopt the voucher system on a national scale (Cox, 2003). 'Chile's bold reform of education system governance in the 1980s', claims Delannoy, 'constitutes the longest-running and largest-scale test of a voucher system yet implemented anywhere in the world' (p. 62). As noted by Cox (2003):

> Financing, efficiency and distribution of power were the foundations for education reform at the beginning of the 1980s and was interpreted as decisive for the improvement of educational quality. Changes in the management as well as the configuration of pressures and incentives for performance coming from competition for enrolment and other secondary measures … were the means to look for improvements in learning outcomes. (p. 24, own translation).)

The three core policy technologies that make up this reform are the national assessment (SIMCE), a whole school performance reward scheme (SNED), and the university entrance examination (PSU). Below I provide a succinct account of each of these policies and consider their 'combinatorial productivity' (DeLanda, 2007, p. 51).

SIMCE

The Chilean Military Government introduced the education national quality assessment SIMCE in 1988,[5] with the aim of monitoring school performances across the country and improving education quality as a whole. The SIMCE is an annual standardised test which gathers information from every school in the country on the students' performance in mathematics, Spanish, and sciences at Year 4, and alternatively at Year 8 and 10. SIMCE has features of a low-stakes test for the students because they are not individually marked by the results, but it has high-stakes for the schools because their enrolment is affected by their ability to produce good results (Cf. Delannoy, 2000).

School results can be accessed online at the Ministry of Education's website, where information can be browsed by region, borough, or institution. Individual school reports provide contextual information (such as school type, enrolment) and characteristics of the group of students assessed that year (number of students, sex, socio-economic group). Reports also allow for inter-school comparisons as information is provided by school type in relation to the national average and within schools in the same socio-economic group; and for intra-school comparisons in relation to the previous year's attainment and the cohort level of achievement in mathematics and Spanish classified by category (advanced, intermediate, beginner).

SNED

The SNED (Sistema Nacional de Evaluacion del Desempeño) is a whole-school performance reward scheme designed to foster competition between schools by the allocation of merit awards. There is a biannual call for applications, which is open to both municipal and private-subsidised schools. The awards consist of teachers' bonuses for the whole school for a two-year period. Schools are classified within their region according to school level (primary-secondary), and location (urban-rural). Then they are clustered into 'homogeneous groups', based on statistical information such as average family expenditure on education, level of education of the parents, community characteristics, physical accessibility of the school. Once grouped, schools are assessed based on their performance on a six-factor index, where their SIMCE results represent 65%[6] of the final score (McMeekin, 2000, p. 24).

PSU

The Prueba de Seleccion Universitaria (PSU) is the university entrance examination, which is a multiple choice test centrally administered by the Universidad de Chile, to gain admission to one of the 25 publicly funded universities in Chile. Admission to these universities is based upon (1) students' performance at PSU (between 70% and 90%) and (2) high school performance (between 10% and 30%).

Taken together, these three policy technologies are highly interdependent and create the impression of a coherent whole, a meritocratic machine that, as claimed by The Brick,[7], would allocate 'automatic and impersonal rewards and punishments' (Centro de Estudios Públicos, 1992, pp. 67–68, own translation). Parents who made the 'right' informed school choices based on available metrics from the SIMCE are likely to find their children gaining access to top universities, as shown by the high correlation between SIMCE and PSU.[8] Schools that carefully choose the right teachers, properly invest in teacher monitoring and test preparation for the SIMCE, implement admission procedures[9] that systematically block applicants that represent a threat to the overall school performance (supposedly in the best interest of the child), and/or offer performance-related incentives to students (such as school trips[10]) are likely to be awarded the SNED, which will keep teachers' motivation high and continue to attract highly motivated parents. In turn, schools publicise the list of students gaining access to top universities as a 'guarantee' of quality education.

Because of the connectedness, continuity and boundary of its elements, I argue that Chile constitutes an Intensified Market Environment (IME). Connectedness relates to the proximity and interdependence of its components (such as market metrics at different levels, technologies for monitoring and tracking progression, systems of rewards, etc.); continuity relates to the unbroken and consistent succession or flow that produces the overall impression of a coherent whole;[11] the continuity and connectedness of its elements create the effect of boundary, 'a sense of stable contour' (Butler, 1993, p. xxii) that creates the illusion of an interior and an exterior and 'produce a domain of excluded and delegitimised' (p. xxiv) teaching and learning practices. At a dynamic level, intensified market environments are characterised by the artificially induced perception of risk through the accelerated flow of performance-based signifiers and the increased volume of accumulation-based practices that their circulation demands.

Data gathering and selection criteria

In order to access these narratives and consider their implications in terms of subject positions, this paper focuses on articles published in mainstream newspapers and fringe publications during the last Concertación administration (2006–2010) and the subsequent Coalición administration (2010–2014), which represent, in my view, the summit of the neoliberal project in Chile.[12] It is worth noting here that the reason for focusing on an extended period of time (instead of a narrower focus, i.e. one year) is because public narratives do not suddenly emerge as a response to social or political changes, but build up slowly over time. That is, it takes a significant amount of time for these formations to stabilise and sediment, and also for them to mutate or disappear. I have mapped 224 articles published in this period across mainstream newspapers (such as *La Tercera* and *El Mercurio*) and fringe media, and the searches contained keywords and subject headings such as SIMCE, ranking, league table, in combination with role-specific terms such as parent, student, teacher, and head teacher respectively.

Drawing upon Youdell's (2006, 2011) work on contemporary education policy discourse and its implications for the identity formation, I argue that the level of analytical detail needed in order to account for these processes is such that only a fraction of the data can be subject to such readings. Thus, the analysis that I offer does not intend to be representative or exhaustive of the existing articles published during the period specified above. Rather, the selection criteria for articles included in this paper is based on their ability to condense and synthesise meaning regarding the actual practices, expectations, and underlying normative notions that regulate the interpretation of available subject positions. In other words, they represent key analytic instances of intelligibility, 'privileged condensations of meaning' (Howarth, 2000, p. 110) that work towards the stabilisation of processes of sense-making.

In order to analyse the particularities of public narratives within the context of market intensification, in the following section I look at a set of 'obligatory scenes' that, by connecting a particular selection of events create a 'mainstream plot', in Somers' terms.

Obligatory scenes

By looking at Hollywood clichés, Žižek (2000) suggests that 'obligatory scenes' constitute the unwritten set of rules that regulate our actions. In fact, clichés bring together elements from structural, relational and symbolic dimensions. For instance, one illustration of how these dimensions are connected together is what has been referred to as the 'Grocery bag' rule:

> whenever a scared, cynical woman who does not want to fall in love again is pursued by a suitor who wants to tear down her wall of loneliness, she will go grocery shopping; the bags will always break and the fruit and vegetables spill everywhere—either to symbolise the mess her life is in, and/or so that the suitor can help her pick up the pieces of her life, not only her potatoes and apples. (p. 133)

Encoded in this scene are, for instance, assumptions about gender roles and expectations, such as the fragility and emotionality of women, and being single as

something that needs to be 'fixed'. Also present in this scene is the idea of chance as the genuine source of romantic love, as noted by Dolar (1993) in his discussion of 'injunctions of love'. Dolar makes reference to the ways in which melodramas follow a common pattern, one in which the couple meets by chance and through no endeavour of their own. However, the turning point is when –

> what happened unintentionally and by pure chance is in the second stage recognised as the realisation of their innermost and memorial wishes and desires. The contingent miraculously becomes the place of his deepest truth, the sign of Fate given by the Other. (p. 83)

What Žižek and Dolar are suggesting here is not that these scenes per se regulate our actions, but that the complex set of values, expectations, anxieties, etc., embedded in them make up the, in Taylor's (2004) terms, 'repertoire' of collective practices at the disposal of a given society (p. 25) and the individuals within it. Below I analyse four 'obligatory' scenes that have at their heart the notion of an entrepreneurial self,[13] and thus suggest a displacement of duties and responsibilities from the state to atomised individuals. These scenes emphasise individual attributes such as motivation, ambition, determination, and craftiness, over and against the constraints imposed by broader cultural and political institutions. For each of the scenes I provide a brief background first and then focus on a single event.

Yes, we can!

Under the headings 'Between an average head teacher and a top one there are 72 points of difference on students' scores at PSU' (*El Mercurio*, 2011, own translation), the newspaper *El Mercurio* discusses the findings from IM Trust consultants in relation to the university entrance examination. The report finds that students attending a school with a top head teacher achieve 72 points more than their fellows attending a school with an average head teacher. As the article highlights, 'this increase in the exam's score could mean for a student to have the chance of entering university and having a good income for a lifetime'. The study goes on to quantify the rate of success at the university entrance examination, arguing that at a public school students have 13% of chances of passing the exam if the school has an average head teacher, and that their possibilities increase to a 17.2% if they have a good head teacher and to 22.4% if they have a top one. The take-up of this type of research by the media reinforces the sense of overall coherence of the performance driven system and the belief in the intrinsic interdependence of its elements. Also, it emphasises the idea that metrics-informed decisions can minimise risk, and consequently restates the need for endless partitioning and measurement to the infinitesimal detail.

One 'obligatory' scene that relates to the role of head teachers is that inspirational leadership precedes success, particularly in remote or deprived areas. The article titled: 'The clues to success as a rural school matches the SIMCE scores of top-performing schools in Chile' (La Tercera, 2009b). The article constructs the school as a symbol of deprivation (the remote, technologically-deprived rural school) that nonetheless evidences high performance, a proof that anyone can make it to the top (Cf. Tawney's analogy of 'The Tadpole Philosophy', in Reay, 2013). The head teacher is presented as a results-focused charismatic leader that individually delivers self-confidence, and in so doing maximises benefit for everyone (for instance in the form of material rewards through the SNED Award). Alongside an account of the high expectations and motivational environment that support the success of the

Amelia Vial Concha school in the national quality assessment, the article highlights that the head teacher writes to each student on their SIMCE exam sheet 'you can make it'. These American Dream-type stories reinforce the fantasy of equal footing, suggesting that everyone can succeed in this competition regardless of their geographic, social or economic position.[14] This scene suggests that success under disadvantaged conditions is not necessarily constrained by structural inequalities but by the lack of motivation, innovation and entrepreneurship of the actors in those contexts. From this perspective, rather than a revision of the existing economic and cultural structures in place what is needed is to provide key actors in leadership positions with the 'right' set of skills. The result of this perspective is that the focus on individual agency/responsibility detracts from prioritising the need to address structural inequalities.

Numbers are transparent

The newspaper *La Tercera* (2008) discusses the findings of a study by the most prestigious universities in the country (Universidad Católica y Universidad de Chile) that analyses the correlation between SIMCE scores and teachers' performance at the National Teacher Evaluation System. The study argues that students taught by teachers marked with 'outstanding' achieve 25 points more at the SIMCE. This type of analysis offers a simplified, off-the-shelf, highly decontextualized understanding of teaching and the teacher's professional role, and reinforces the fantasy of comprehensive tools that can measure up and condense the totality of a practice, a tyranny of numbers as Ball (2015) puts it. It also reinforces the idea of interdependence between these policy-technologies and the overall impression of a consistent succession of elements. In turn, this conveys the impression of a transparent reality that can simply be captured by metrics, where pedagogic decisions such as how to teach do not require much debate; it is just a matter of cherry-picking teachers with 'distinction' in order to boost SIMCE scores.

In this context, a second 'obligatory' scene relates to a group of unmotivated teenagers who, guided by a courageous teacher, manage to achieve beyond expectations. That is the story of Miguel Astorga, a Year 8 teacher whose class achieved 380 points in the SIMCE in 2012: the top national score for maths within state funded schools, and the second place across all schools in the country (UMCE, 22 April 2013). The article states that this outstanding score was not achieved by chance but resulted from the mutual commitment of the 43 students in the class, as well as the passion, perseverance and motivation of the teacher.[15] The UMCE university, where he trained as a maths teacher, provides details of his success on their website. With a rock-band-style picture (his image at the front and his students in a blurred background), the article reconstructs the setting. 'It was a rather inhospitable and warm place' the article reads when describing conditions in which that group of students started working with Miguel, as their room was provisionally set in a container located within the premises of a GP practice in Puente Alto. Drawing on a classic image of the hero teacher's fighting spirit, this scene suggests that tests 'seamlessly' reflect the will and determination of teachers and students regardless of the structural conditions that precede them. This idealised construction of teaching as a practice that can by-pass material, social and symbolic constraints at the school and the community level works towards the 'responsibilisation' of teachers. Lemke (2001, p. 201) claims that responsibilisation responds to the neoliberal notion of rationality,

which assumes that individual actions are 'the expression of free will on the basis of a self-determined decision', and so its consequences 'are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them'.

Natural selection

Within the market logic, parents are expected to manage and mitigate the risk of choosing a school that could potentially hinder future opportunities for their children. One illustration of the ways in which parents are addressed by market-led optimising technologies in Chile was the campaign called 'More information, better education', sponsored by the Ministry of Education in 2010. This campaign comprised a series of strategies aimed at fostering informed school choice by parents, which included the setting up of 456 information stands throughout the country. As noted in one of the local websites (Servicio Region, 2010), the stand was launched by the regional head of education, followed by a jazz performance of a group of students from a local school. The stand was intended to provide information organized around four products: a map of the schools in the borough identified by average score at SIMCE, a comparative table with a school defined by the user and the closest three neighbouring schools, a borough league table, and a report of a specific school with detailed information about the school's features. This is what Rose (1996, pp. 53–54) termed advanced liberal strategies, which 'seek techniques of government that create a distance between the decisions of formal political institutions and other social actors, conceive of these actors in new ways as subjects of responsibility, autonomy and choice, and seek to act upon them through shaping and utilizing their freedom'. The 'More information, better education campaign' highlights the centrality attributed to metrics in the decision-making process of a 'responsible' parent and the displacement of other criteria to take into account when choosing a school such as pedagogical approach, school ethos, and other aesthetic or cultural factors, a localised version of what Grek (2009) calls 'governing by numbers'.

However, parents are not only addressed by hard data, but they are also interpellated by various sorts of narratives, that encapsulate 'the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie this expectation' (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). A third 'obligatory' scene relates to the struggles of success-driven parents going through the school admissions process. Under the title 'Admission pre-kinder 2010: a view from the schools' the newspaper *La Tercera* (2010) presents the vicissitudes that parents have to go through in order to enrol their children in a nursery. In this 'radiography', as they call it, of how schools perceive this process, the article makes it clear that 'although the children are the ones applying, the parents are the ones competing':

> Enrolling the children in pre-kinder it is a competition in which anything goes: from sending your child to the school with a rosary on their hands, to pay private lessons so they are fully prepared for the exam, which is simply about singing nursery rhymes, copying a shape and behaving themselves during the hour of the assessment. But when 300 children apply to 135 vacancies, as in the Santiago College, the parents are the ones under pressure and do the possible, the impossible and the absurd to get their children in … At least in 10 of the most demanded schools in Santiago, the diagnostic is unanimous: parents surprise even the admission department of the schools as they do anything in order to get a place for their children, not only because of the stress they are exposed to but also for how well informed

> they are. Parents talk about statistics and numbers, it's impressive says Vivian Ramírez, the head teacher of the preprimary department of Instituto Alonso de Ercilla School. (*La Tercera,* 2010, own translation)

Taken together, these tales about the anxieties and the sequence of multiple obstacles that parents have to overcome also constitute a demand about the commitment and endurance that 'good parenting requires', and it –

> presents market forces as offering to everyone an apparently equal chance to utilise their powers of consumer choice and control. Those who do not exploit their opportunities, have only themselves to blame. (Vincent, 1994, p. 263)

This idealised construction of parenting presents the middle class approach to childrearing (Lareau, 2003) as the norm, and thus, 'if one fails to reinstate the norm "in the right way", one becomes subject to further sanction, one feels the prevailing conditions of existence threatened' (Butler, 1997, pp. 28–29). The normalisation of this parenting style suggests that the allocation of educational opportunities simply resembles a process of natural selection, where individuals who are, borrowing biological terminology, 'more fit' have better potential for survival.

Self-preservation

Students at the end of secondary education are addressed by a wide range of demands of competitive league table performance from both schools and universities in relation to the entrance examination PSU. This intense pressure is depicted in a newspaper article titled 'Grants for good students cause a score increase in private universities' (*La Tercera*, 2009a), that reported how some of the new private universities are attracting top-ranked students at the PSU by offering substantial grants in order to escalate in the league tables. A student with a high score at the PSU, states the article, 'is nowadays one of the most valuable assets for higher education institutions'. For instance, the article highlights that Universidad Diego Portales secured the highest cut-off score for the BA Law degree for the first time, outscoring the 'traditional' universities.

One 'obligatory' scene that captures this commodification of students relates to the goal-driven student who desperately seeks to get a place at university, epitomised by the recent exodus of 400 students from high-performing secondary schools to other average institutions due to the introduction of class rank into the university admission formula (Teletrece, 2014). The class rank is the relative position of the student in relation to the overall performance of the school in a given year. By moving to another (less performance-focused) institution in the last year of their secondary education, students are likely improve their position in the class rank and hence maximise their chances of getting a place and a scholarship at one of the top universities.[16] An example of the ways in which 'students construct themselves as consumers and producers of the semiotic value of schools' (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p. 121) can be found at the online magazine *Economía y Negocios* (2015) which tells the story of Katherine, a student who decided to move from the Internado Nacional Femenino de Ñuñoa to the Complejo Educacional Esperanza de Macul with the aim of improving her chances of getting a place for a Psychology degree at a top-tier university. Indeed, the article highlights that by changing school her class rank went up from 4.1 to 6.2. Again, her story is not exceptional. Titled 'The high school that

epitomises student loss due to class ranks' (*La Tercera*, 2014, own translation) the newspaper *La Tercera* describes the radical change that the Liceo Jose Ignacio Zenteno has undergone, doubling its enrolment in less than two weeks with students coming from other more academically demanding institutions with the aim of improving their class rank. In these accounts the advantage-seeking student becomes an idealised subject, characterised by self-interested behaviour towards the optimisation of choice, efficiency and competitiveness as noted by Ong (2006, p. 6).

Discussion – from descriptive accounts to discursive demands

Based on the analysis of these public narratives, my argument here is that under intensified market conditions, what would have been a simple account of an experience within the public domain (e.g. the story of a motivated teacher whose students' attainment is outstanding), is transformed into a discursive demand. This is because these are not free-standing stories, but are connected to a wider 'narrative network' (Somers, 1995, p. 135). Thus, these stories constitute forms of interpellation, and as such they delineate modalities of being by the articulation of specific principles and practices of self-government. In fact, while these accounts represent crystallisations of wider narratives they also become interpellative: they constitute a requirement to acquitting oneself against the tails of 'ordinary people' successfully navigating through the metrics-based demands of the system. These stories give flesh and bone to otherwise cold and distant league tables and rankings and in dong this they fulfil a normative function. And this is where the *liminality* of public narratives lies: they incorporate real stories based on real actors, but these stories become meaningful only in relation to a range of 'cross-cutting relational story-lines in which social actors find or locate themselves' (Somers, 1994, p. 607). In this case, the 'obligatory' scenes discussed in this paper are integrated into an 'intelligible plot', based around notions of meritocracy, and 'land of opportunity'. The primacy of this narrative theme 'determines how events are processed and what criteria will be used to prioritise events and render meaning to them' (p. 617). Overall, these accounts (which incorporate both real and imagined, factual or desired elements) seem to suggest 'opportunity for each according to ability or achievement' (Adams & Schneiderman, (1931/2012, p. xvi) regardless of social class or circumstances of birth.

Conclusion

Drawing upon the work of Margaret Somers, I have argued that observable and measurable behaviour is not enough to understand the wider implications of policy interventions. From a narrative perspective, 'people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives' (p. 614). By looking at a series of public narratives I have argued that under intensified market conditions the scenes captured in these publicly available stories become interpellative, fulfilling a normative function. The idealised policy subjects (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012) produced by the accelerated flow of performance-based signifiers feed into wider meritocratic 'master narratives' of effort and discipline as the sole sources of achievement built upon de-classed and geographically unrestrained accounts of 'success'. In the case of Chile, the

'mainstream plot' embedded in these public narratives places the national assessment at the very centre of any possibility of self-articulation, dominated by idealised versions of a maximising self. Thus, whilst the recent demonstrations and policy changes in Chile seem to suggest an amelioration of neoliberal politics (The Conversation, 20 May 2014), the scenes discussed in this paper show that, irrespective of the significance of these changes, the subject positions captured in these public narratives will become increasingly rigid as result of metrics-driven pedagogic processes. For these policy changes to address the 'institutionalised patterns of cultural value' (Fraser, 2003, p. 29), a more substantial revision needs to take place, one that focuses not only on the just allocation of goods (distributive justice), but incorporates a revision of the systems of meaning that produce those subject positions. As noted at the beginning of this paper, some grassroots movements like Alto al SIMCE seem to be leading the way towards a more radical change.

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Notes

[1] See for instance https://www.facebook.com/altoalsimce and http://www.emol.com/noticias/Nacional/2015/09/26/751702/Padres-agrupados-en-Alto-al-Simce-llaman-a-no-rendir-evaluacion.html

[2] See http://www.emol.com/noticias/Nacional/2016/01/07/767310/Mineduc-presenta-cronograma-de-Simce-hasta-2020-y-confirma-que-numero-de-pruebas-disminuiran-a-la-mitad.html

[3] See Sochos, A. (2014) Attachment Security and the Social World. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

[4] Here I draw attention to the constitutive elements of the architecture the Chilean education system and their implications, but I do not intend to summarize the marketization of education in Chile, which can be found in Cox (2003), Delannoy (2000), Espinola (1993), and Gauri (1998).

[5] Previous versions of the SIMCE were: Prueba Nacional 1967-1971 (run by the Ministerio de Evaluación); Programa de Evaluación del Rendimiento escolar (PER) 1982-1984 (run by the Departamento de Investigación y Tecnología de la Universidad Católica—DICTUC); Sistema de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación (SECE) 1985-1986 (run by the Centro de Perfeccionamiento e Investigaciones Pedagógica—CPEIP)

[6] Effectiveness, operating as the SIMCE scores in Spanish and mathematics weights 37% and Improvement, operating as value-added in SIMCE scores since last application weights 28%.

[7] The Brick was a confidential economic plan designed by the 'Chicago Boys'—a group of economists most of whom trained at the University of Chicago under Milton Friedman and Arnold Harberger—before the military coup of 1973, which in time became the backbone of Chilean economic policy under Augusto Pinochet's rule.

[8] A study by Universidad San Sebastian claims that the correlation between SIMCE and PSU is 85% (Year 8) and 91% (Year 10). See http://www.latercera.com/contenido/657_268113_9.shtml

[9] There have been significant changes in relation to this recently. See: The Conversation (20 May 2014). Sweeping reforms set to end for-profit education in Chile. Retrieved 23 February 2016, from http://theconversation.com/sweeping-reforms-set-to-end-for-profit-education-in-chile-26406

[10] See http://www.latercera.com/noticia/nacional/2015/10/680-650919-9-colegios-ofrecen-desde-decimas-hasta-viajes-fuera-de-la-region-si-los-alumnos.shtml

[11] Such as the market narratives around impersonal rewards and punishments according to merit, which suggest a virtuous circle where teachers' efforts and commitment are supposedly translated into student scores, subsequently assembled into whole school performance, and later turned into material and symbolic rewards that will return to and benefit those students.

[12] For a detailed analysis of the different stages within the process of market intensification in Chile see (Santori, 2014).

[13] Here I draw upon Foucault's analyses of bio-politics (1978-79/2010). As noted by Lemke (2001, p. 202) neoliberalism "encourages individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form. It responds to stronger 'demand' for individual scope for self-determination and desired autonomy by

'supplying' individuals and collectives with the possibility of actively participating in the solution of specific matters and problems which had hitherto been the domain of state agencies specifically empowered to undertake such tasks. This participation has a 'price-tag': the individuals themselves have to assume responsibility for these activities and the possible failure thereof".

[14] This ties in with existing narratives and programmes (such as *Teach for All*) which, by combining 'anyone can make it' discourses together with 'charismatic super-teachers' conceal underlying structural inequalities.

[15] These accounts of the hero teacher are also common in film and literature, such as Kindergarten Cop (1990) and Dead Poets Society (1989).

[16] As result of criticism and demonstrations this policy has been recently revised. See http://psu.demre.cl/proceso-admision/factores-seleccion/puntaje-ranking

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